

# Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i26.5758>

*Foucault Studies*, No. 26, 106-110, June 2019

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## REVIEW

**Michel Foucault, Patrice Maniglier and Dork Zabunyan, *Foucault at the Movies*. Translated and edited by Clare O'Farrell (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 264 pp. ISBN: 9780231167079**

This book serves as an overview and critical engagement with Michel Foucault's few (and yet important) works on cinema. Acknowledging that while "we don't find any sustained treatment of film in Foucault's work," the authors of *Foucault at the Movies* assure that "there is a general awareness that he did occasionally cross paths with [it], even if his bibliography is somewhat limited on this score."<sup>1</sup> The book distances itself from theoretical schools that "claim to reflect on film or philosophize using the image" but are "overwhelmingly dominated by an approach that consists in finding illustrations of philosophical arguments in film."<sup>2</sup> Maniglier and Zabunyan emphasize that "philosophers can find in film a partner, a rival, an inspiration, a place where an experiment can be conducted in what it means to think otherwise",<sup>3</sup> and indeed, the authors find in Foucault ways of engaging cinema that do not simply apply philosophical concepts to films but experiment with them as a means of reconceptualizing the moving image's relationship to philosophy and to history. While *Foucault at the Movies* does address the aesthetics of film, it is not within the scope of the book to theorize films using Foucault's work or to engender any new aesthetic framework for engaging moving images. Instead, this is a book that both speaks to the idea that "cinema can do philosophy in a way that is unique to the medium," as David Sorfa would put it,<sup>4</sup> and reveals what has long been under the noses of film and Foucault scholars, remaining conspicuously absent from the relevant literatures: Foucault not only "encountered" cinema but saw it as a method for thinking and seeing "otherwise."<sup>5</sup> He associated cinema with the "popular memory of struggles" and "saw that film opened up the possibility of grasping [...] 'molecular' history."<sup>6</sup> According to Maniglier and Zabunyan, Foucault's

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<sup>1</sup> Patrice Maniglier and Dork Zabunyan, "Introduction: Michel Foucault's Cut," in Michel Foucault, Patrice Maniglier and Dork Zabunyan, *Foucault at the Movies*, ed. and trans. Clare O'Farrell (2018), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Maniglier and Zabunyan, "Introduction," x.

<sup>3</sup> "Introduction," xi.

<sup>4</sup> David Sorfa, "What is Film-Philosophy?," *Film-Philosophy* 20.1 (2016): 3.

<sup>5</sup> Maniglier and Zabunyan, "Introduction," xi.

<sup>6</sup> "Introduction," xii.

“encounters” with cinema are “so profound” that they “fulfill all our expectations of what we might hope for in a dialogue between philosophical activity and artistic practice.”<sup>7</sup>

Various critical questions guide *Foucault at the Movies*: “[i]n what sense does film allow history to be done otherwise? Does film allow those tiny elements that make up the cogs of what Foucault describes as a ‘technology of power’ to be assessed and displayed [...]? Can film contribute to a critique of our present, exposing principles that other modes of representation simply miss?”<sup>8</sup> While Foucault’s major works are invoked in pursuit of answers to these questions, the aim of the book is not to point out “parallels between different aspects of Foucault’s work of which the spoken and written words on film form a part”.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Maniglier and Zabunyan prefer to “leave the comfort of exegesis behind and situate [them]selves at the level of the *effects* produced by [the] interviews, ‘conversations,’ and other articles by Foucault on film.”<sup>10</sup> The notion of “effect” is central to *Foucault at the Movies*, as the authors express that “four effects emerge broadly” from Foucault’s work on cinema:<sup>11</sup> the “effect on film criticism, which makes practical use of Foucault’s thought”; the “effect on the theory and aesthetics of film” following Foucault’s connection between “moving images” and “relations of power”; “the effect on the practice of philosophy”; and finally, the “effect on historical inquiry” that accounts for Foucault’s “connection between film and knowledge.”<sup>12</sup>

After a brief introduction by Maniglier and Zabunyan, the book is divided into two guiding chapters, followed by a series of interviews with and short writings by Foucault. These two initial chapters, first by Zabunyan and then by Maniglier, serve as syntheses of the arguments about film that Foucault will go on to make in the book’s later sections. They also contextualize his interviews and writings. Zabunyan’s chapter, “What Film Is Able to Do: Foucault and Cinematic Knowledge” begins with a discussion of Foucault’s relationship to the seminal French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Foucault was sought out for an interview by the journal in 1974. This interview, titled “Film, History, and Popular Memory,” occurred “at a particular moment in the history of the journal, which at the time was trying to distance itself from the ‘Maoist years’ it had just gone through.”<sup>13</sup> The interviewers, Pascal Bonitzer, Serge Toubiana and Serge Daney, were “strongly opposed to the ‘fashion for retro’ that was fossilizing a still vibrant past on screens – that of the Second World War with all its compromises and its collaborations.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, they contacted Foucault to “record his views on two films that had been released almost simultaneously, namely, Louis Malle’s *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974) and Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1973), both of which were symbols for the ‘fashion for retro,’ which

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Dork Zabunyan, “What Film is Able to Do: Foucault and Cinematic Knowledge,” in *Foucault at the Movies*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 5.

prevented the darkest pages of history from throwing light onto the present.”<sup>15</sup> For Toubiana, the “essential contribution” of this interview is Foucault’s “critique of a restrictive and mechanistic Marxist vision of power tied strictly to economics.”<sup>16</sup> This critique is perhaps best exemplified in Foucault’s discussion of the memoir (and René Allio’s film) *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister and My Brother* (1973/1976). The interviewers saw in *I, Pierre*, an “analytical power of a writing that, although not rooted in any preestablished knowledge, was still the repository of relations of power (legal, police, medical, and so on) and in spite of itself managed to [both] confound established knowledge” and engender a “vacuum around itself through its nonadherence.”<sup>17</sup> Foucault articulates that *I, Pierre*, performs a “cross-check against the Malleian theme of the ‘primitive, pawn of a blind history’ [...] a ‘cross-check’ that goes hand in hand with the creation of popular memory.”<sup>18</sup>

One of the most intriguing insights that emerges in Zabunyan’s chapter (that Foucault himself later takes up in an interview) is the use of the term “art of poverty” in relation to cinema, particularly the films of Marguerite Duras. When discussing Duras’ work, Foucault uses the term “poverty” as a “reference to the conquest of a ‘memory without remembering’; a ‘memory of memory with each memory erasing all remembering, and so on indefinitely.’”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Duras’ “cinematographic ascesis” inheres in the “images of bodies [which] become detached from their medium (the screen) and enter into a gaseous state that is in sharp contrast to the simple impression of presence (on the screen).”<sup>20</sup> Exploring further Foucault and film’s relationship to knowledge and history, Zabunyan writes that film “lines up powerfully with the archaeological project, using its own mechanisms to elaborate a series and examination of an event that it is a part of [...]”<sup>21</sup> While the filmmakers Thomas Harlan and Rainer Fassbinder are identified here as directors who confront contentious or “grubby” histories without “escaping into retro or taking a moralizing overview,” it was the film *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977) by Hans Jürgen Syberberg that was cited by Foucault as a “‘beautiful monster,’” a film that did not conceal what was “‘sordid, ignoble, and mundanely abject’” about Nazi perpetration but demonstrated how it seeped into the masses, into the most “most ordinary of things – clothing, popular culture, ways of talking, and so on.”<sup>22</sup>

The chapter by Maniglier, “Versions of the Present: Foucault’s Metaphysics of the Event Illuminated by Cinema,” advances several contributions that are far too many to enumerate in full. However, they include very intriguing and generative illustrations of “event” in relation to the cinema of Alain Resnais and Allio’s *I, Pierre*, as well as a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

discussion of “popular history” that will be useful for readers. Maniglier articulates that *I, Pierre* operates on the “terrain of a nonhistorical relation to the past.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, through its use of “mobile framing,” or its “capacity to separate the source of [...] sound from the image that is in frame,” the film “shatter[s] the most obvious unities that we believe allow us to capture events (complete sentences and individual organisms).”<sup>24</sup>

In terms of research and content, this book is outstanding. It demonstrates careful researches of film journals and magazines, interviews, as well as sound interpretations and translations of little-known writings by Foucault. Particularly useful is the “Film, History, and Popular Memory” interview from *Cahiers* because it lucidly demonstrates Foucault’s understanding of film as part of the archaeological apparatus for challenging progressivist histories and dominant discourses. Readers might also find the interview with Hélène Cixous quite interesting and generative.<sup>25</sup> However, despite its many strengths, the book does suffer some small setbacks. While some might find the book’s structure useful, others might be put off by it. As has already been indicated, Zabunyan and Maniglier provide two guiding chapters that synthesize the material that is to follow in Foucault’s interviews and writings. This structure means that the reader is invited to engage with analyses of Foucault’s writings on film without first being exposed to them. In the opinion of this reviewer, a more digestible trajectory would have been to spread the interviews with Foucault throughout the text while offering historical context and critical engagement along the way.

A further problem arises with the text’s engagement with the work of Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze is invoked in Maniglier’s chapter with respect to “event.”<sup>26</sup> His work alongside Félix Guattari is brought up in Zabunyan’s discussion of “the eroticization of power.”<sup>27</sup> Deleuze’s seminal work on the “time-image” is also engaged with. Several sites of overlap between Deleuze and Foucault are identified in this book as well as the ways in which their philosophies reinforce one another. Yet, the reader is not given a clear sense of whether their perspectives diverged where cinema was concerned. Are we to take away from this book that Foucault and Deleuze were not all that different when it came to cinema? The authors do not take the opportunity to fully elaborate.

In sum, *Foucault at the Movies* is a challenging yet satisfying read that bridges a considerable gap in film and philosophy. Well-researched, its overarching strength is the location of film within Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical project. On this front, the book inaugurates new possibilities for film historians and scholars interested in discontinuous, “minor” and “molecular” histories. This book will prove to be pivotal reading for anyone interested in the intersections of film-philosophy and film history and

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<sup>23</sup> Patrice Maniglier, “Versions of the Present: Foucault’s Metaphysics of the Event Illuminated by Cinema,” in *Foucault at the Movies*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, “Marguerite Duras: Memory Without Remembering,” in *Foucault at the Movies*, 122-134.

<sup>26</sup> Maniglier, “Versions of the Present,” 55.

<sup>27</sup> Zabunyan, “What Film is Able to Do,” 30-1.

will doubtlessly titillate Foucault scholars interested in a synthesis of these lesser-known writings.

### References

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### Author info

Kyler Chittick  
Graduate Student and Teaching Assistant, M.A. Program  
Cinema Studies Institute  
University of Toronto  
Canada